Zoya Voskresenskaya

ON A WINTER EVENING

MALYSH PUBLISHERS

DEAR CHILDREN!.

Everybody in the world knows the name of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the great teacher and leader of the working people, the founder of the first socialist state in the world.

But on the winter evening, which this book deals with, he was called just Volodya, for he was only ten years old then. The Ulyanov family to which he belonged was a large one.

He had an elder brother and sister named Sasha and Anya, and three yonger siblings: brother Mitya and two sisters—Olya and Manyasha. It was a wonderful family.

In the evenings they used to hold family festivals. The parents, Maria Aleksandrovna and Ilya Nikolayevich, organized interesting games and read favorite books to their children.

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Illustrated by A. Hailov

MALYSH PUBLISHERS MOSCOW

Anya and Sasha were playing chess.

Daddy was working in his study, and Mummy and the younger children were preparing to go on an exciting "troika * ride".

Only the wall lamp over the grand piano was on in the drawing-room, and the larger part of the room was in semidarkness. The windows were covered with rime, but indoors it was warm and cosy with the logs crackling merrily in the hall stove.

Volodya kept running to the dining-room and back to the drawing-room, undecided what to choose. He very much wanted to play a game of chess with Sasha, but the "troika ride" was great fun too.

* A team of three horses.

"All right," he agreed to the wheedling of the younger children. "I'll stay and play, but only on condition that I'll be the coachman."

Mother, Olya and Mitya pushed four chairs together to make the sleigh. Manyasha's high chair was placed in front as a coach-box, and the wide armchair with the ornamental three-tipped crest on the back made a perfect troika of blacks.

Volodya harnessed the horses: he wound lengths of rope round the crest and tightened the belly band. The horses had become restive, they were dying to be off. The coachman snapped at them crossly.

Mother and Manyasha settled down in the back, while Olya and Mitya took the front seat. Olya wrapped herself up in a woolly shawl, Mitya put on his hood, and Manyasha her bonnet. They had a long way to go, and the cold was really fierce in the open country. The coachman pulled his belt tight, put on his mittens and asked in a deep voice:

"Where to, madam?"

"Today we'll take a trip to the Land of Kindness and Joy," Mother replied. "Do you know the way there?"

"I know the way alright," Volodya said after some thought. "But the road there is fraught with dangers."

"Oh yes, the road will not be easy," Mother said. "We'll encounter many obstacles and hazards. But, let us go, and Godspeed."

"Whoa, my good blacks, whoa!" Volodya urged the horses, swinging his whip.

"A blizzard is starting up so wrap yourselves up properly, children," Mother told them.

Olya pulled the shawl down to the very eyes, Mitya wound the ends of his hood once more round his neck, and Manyasha tugged her bonnet down as far as it would go.

"Look at the fir trees lining the road, look how fluffy they are, muffled in snow to keep from freezing. And that tree on the hill over there looks really pink," Mother pointed to the frost-encrusted window. "It's the light of the setting sun falling on it."

"Look, look," cried Olya. "The sun has turned so red that

you can look straight at it!"

"A sign of foul weather," growled the coachman, and lashed at his troika.

Young Manyasha stared her eyes out to see the sun which Mummy and Olya were talking about.

"Oh, Manyasha, a little hare has jumped out from under that tree," Mother pointed in the direction of the rubber plant.

"I can't see any hare," Manyasha said in all simplicity.

"You can't?" Mitya asked, surprised. "There it is, sitting up and washing its face with its front paws."

"Is it a grey hare or a white hare?"

"It's white as snow, and its ears are pinkish," Olya added.

"I can see it now," Manyasha agreed meekly, stealing glances at the rubber plant. "Only its ears are green."

"Whoa, my good blacks, whoa!" Volodya shouted at his horses, now and again glancing over his shoulder at his passengers. "We are about to cross a river of fire which only the brave can get across. The cowards must get out now."

The children looked at their mother for assurance, and

Mitya said in a quavering voice:

"Mummy, nurse wanted to give me a fright with a chicken feather yesterday. A huge, terrible shadow moved over the wall, but I closed my eyes tight and I almost was not scared."

"That made you a braver boy," Mother told him. "So you'll be well able to get across the river of fire."

Volodya turned round and looked hard at Olya.

"Maybe the young lady feels frightened and doesn't want to come any farther? See the red mist over the river, we're about to plunge right into the flames."

"I'm not frightened," Olya replied proudly.

Mitya hunched himself up and covered his face with his hands. The coachman whipped the horses on, and now they were in the midst of a roaring sea of fire, he was choked for breath, and the long tongues of fire were reaching for his face and hands.

"Whoa, get a move on, look sharp now!" The coachman lashed at the horses with all his might. "We've made it!"

Everybody drew a sigh of relief. Mitya knew for certain now that the moving shadow of a chicken feather was nothing to fear.

"If only we could drive past the Dragon's tower while it's still light," Mother said fretfully. "He can see only at night. He's got just one eye and it flares up when the moon rises."

"Coachman, dear, can we go past before dark?" Olya asked.

"We'll do our best," the coachman replied and reined his horses to a stop.

"Why have we stopped?" the passengers asked in a chorus of anxious voices.

"The trace-horse has become unharnessed. I'll just tighten the collar, clean the bells under the shaftbow so they'll jingle with a jollier sound, and then we'll move on." Volodya tightened the rope on the right-hand tip of the crest on the back of the armchair, climbed up into his box again, and they were off.

"See that magpie on the branch giving us a welcome?" Mitya said.

"And there's a fox biding its time under the tree, swishing its tail so nicely, the sly

thing," Olya added. "Please, magpie, don't trust the fox...."

"I see a little squirrel climbing up a tree, climbing like our Olya," Manyasha now joined in the game.

"Look lively, my blacks, haven't you eaten enough oats?" Volodya cried and, turning to the passengers, told them: "Hold fast now, we are going to race downhill!"

The passengers clutched at the sides of the sleigh, they ducked their heads because the wind was flinging handfuls of snow into their faces and blinding them for a moment, but at last they were on level road again and the horses changed to an easy trot.

"The sun has set, the stars are out," Olya said dreamily, gazing at the ceiling.

"Do you see that great dipper overhead? What is it? Mother asked.

"It's the Great Bear," Olya, Mitya and Volodya all spoke together.

"I want a teddy bear, I want a small bear," Manyasha began to whine.

"Here's one for you," Olya almost jumped for joy. "He's crawling out of the lair and rubbing his eyes. Can you hear him growling?"

"Oh, Mummy," Manyasha whispered in fright, and cuddled up closer to her mother.

"What are those dancing lights, does anyone know?" Olya asked, pointing to the hall where the polished floor reflected the leaping flames in the stove.

"They are the lights in Daddy's schools," Mother told her.

"And what is that glow over the forest?"

"It's the glow from the crenellated wall of the Dragon's tower," Mother said and drew little Manyasha closer.

Suddenly, Olya gave a scream, tumbled off the chair and crawled away on all fours into the darkest corner of the room.

"Stop the horses, stop,"Mother gripped the driver by the shoulders. "My little girl has fallen out of the sleigh."

With no little effort, the driver reined in the horses, jumped down from the box, tethered the horses to an imaginary tree and, shielding his eyes with his hand, plunged into the snowstorm to look for the girl.

Suddenly they heard a creepy, drawn-out howl.

"That's Volodya!" Manyasha cried, clapping her hands.

"No, it's a wolf," Mitya said. He bit hard on his finger and watched the coachman wide-eyed. "Olya is lying under a tree and the pack of wolves is going straight at her," he was near tears.

But the valiant coachman tore his way through the shrubs, sinking deeper and deeper into the snowdrifts. Even Manyasha began to worry and urge Volodya on.

He found the girl at last, almost frozen to death. He picked her up, put his arms round her shoulders, dragged her to the sleigh and began rubbing her hands with snow, while the wolves howled louder and louder.

"The wolves..." Olya moaned. "They almost ate me up. They're hungry and skinny, they gnash their teeth, and their eyes are like tiny green lights."

"One ... two ... three," Mitya counted the wolves. "Watch me kill them all." He raised his toy rifle shoulder high and took aim. "Bang! Got one, it's flailing its legs. Bang! The second one went rolling downhill."

"Bang!" the coachman cried, forgetting his part. "I got the third one, a huge old beast!"

"You can't, Volodya. You're the coachman, you have not got a rifle," Olya told him.

"He might well have taken a rifle along on a journey like this," Mother objected. "We have a splendid coachman, he's brave and good. See, how clever he is with the horses? I do hope we'll get past the Dragon's tower safely. And after that we won't have far to go to our destination."

"Mummy, tell us about the Land of Kindness and Joy," the children wheedled. "What's it like?"

"It's a land inhabited by strong, handsome people. They do not know the meaning of such words as untruth, cowardice and deceit. They have never known illness, hunger or war."

The coachman dropped his reins, turned round and watched his mother with shining eyes, his chin cupped in his hands.

"Mummy, but why can't they make everyone happy?"

"They will as soon as the Dragon has been defeated."

"Volodya, you keep forgetting that you're the coachman," Olya scolded him. "Let's hurry, or we'll fall into the Dragon's clutches."

Volodya whipped the horses on, shouting at them and clicking his tongue. Suddenly, he swung round and said to his mother: "Madam, we cannot go on. Can you hear the horses snorting? A snowstorm has started up, I can't see a thing."

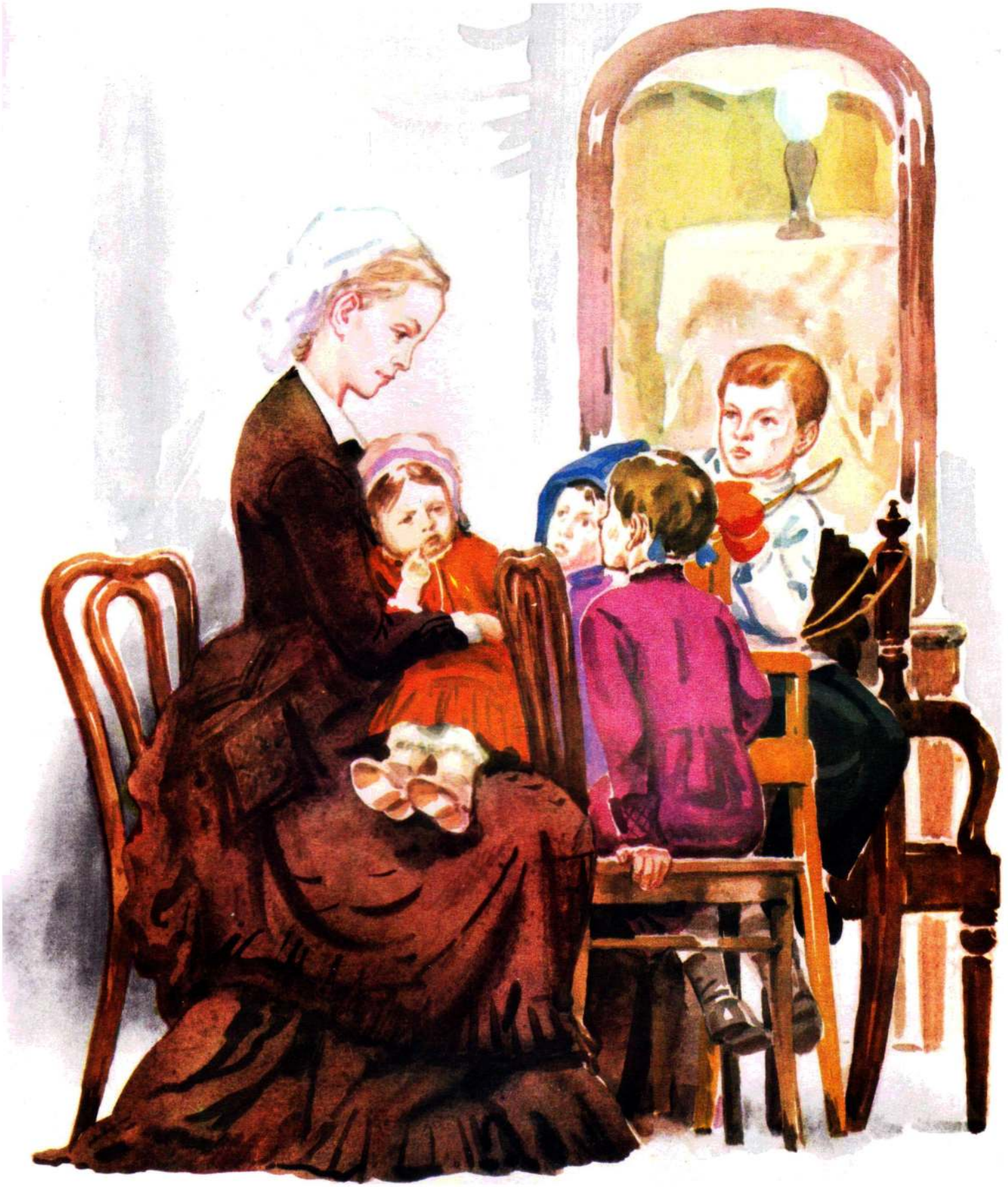
"Shall we turn back then?" Mother asked the children.

"No, no, no!" cried Olya, Mitya and Manyasha.

"There is no way back either," the coachman said in his rumbling voice. "All the roads have been drifted over." Standing up the box, he peered into the distance and, his eyes fixed on the grand piano, said: "I see the Dragon coming. He has three legs, he has a countless number of white and black teeth in his mouth, and his one eye is huge and flashing. He clicks the ground and leaves a dead trail behind him. Men, let us give battle to the enemy!"

Mitya jumped down from the sleigh. Volodya gave him a disappointed look.

"Olya, you'll be a man too," he told his sister.



Manyasha wanted to tag after Olya, but Volodya said briskly: "You, woman, stay with Mummy, and we shall defend you."

The wall lamp shed a wavering circle of light on the lid of the grand piano. But it was no longer a grand piano—it was Dragon himself advancing on his three legs, and showing rows of gleaming white and black teeth in his evilly grinning mouth.

"To battle! Olya, stab him in the mouth while I hack off his hind leg. Mitya, mind his front paws!"

Volodya, Olya and Mitya rushed at the enemy with whoops. Manyasha jumped up and down in the sleigh, dying to join in the fray.

The battle cries and the noise put Sasha and Anya off their chess game, and they wanted to play, too. Even the children's father emerged from his study, affected by the general excitement. He took up his stand behind the rubber tree and loaded the cardboard cannon.

"Wham! Wham!" Volodya shouted every time he hit the Dragon. All at once he jerked forward and wound his arms

round the piano leg—the Dragon had got a hold on him. Volodya twisted and writhed, kicking furiously at the Dragon, and desperately tried to free himself from the monster's clutches. In the meantime, Sasha had crawled under the piano and was striking blow after blow at the Dragon's belly. Olya placed her fingers on the keyboard and cried:

"Ouch! The dragon has bitten my hand, I'm gravely wounded!"

Anya led the wounded warrior to the sleigh, and rushed to help her comrades. But Olya did not think it much fun sitting in the sleigh and playing wounded, so she went into battle again, using her left hand only.

"Boom!" A cracker burst behind the rubber tree. Father was a good gunner, and the cannon ball hit its mark.

"Daddy has knocked out the Dragon's eye! Hurray! Hurray!" shouted Mitya.

"Good shot, Daddy," Volodya said encouragingly to the new recruit.

Sasha helped Volodya to get his arms free, and together they chopped off the Dragon's paw.

Manyasha slid down from the chair, and ran to deliver the final blow to the Dragon.

Mother sat down at the piano and played.

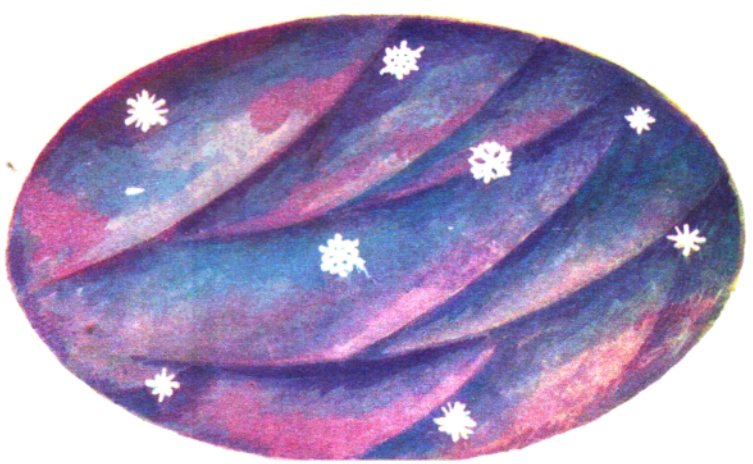
... The Dragon was advancing on them, a terrible, firebreathing monster. Brave, strong people went forward into battle against him. Mother's fingers flew over the keyboard. Fire! The Dragon was hit in his solitary eye. Blinded, he became more ferocious than ever, but the people were more determined now, and their sight was all the keener. Success lent them strength. Strike once more! The Dragon moaned and groaned, he twisted and turned, and then he died. Crashing chords in the lower register....

"He's quite dead now," Volodya said, laughing, as he crawled out from under the piano.

Father lowered the oil lamp, suspended from the ceiling on a cord, and lit it. The drawing-room took on a bright, festive look. The Dragon vanished.

The battle-weary fighters sat round their mother and listened to the song she sang for them:

You may know care and grief in life,
No childhood lasts forever.
Sleep tight, my son, grow big and strong
For struggle and endeavour....



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